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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000765

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [UNSC](#) [EAIR](#) [SA](#) [IR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI WARNS CODEL RAHALL OF
IRANIAN TAKEOVER OF LEBANON

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Hours before the parliamentary election of former Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president, Saad Hariri, leader of the parliamentary majority, thanked visiting CODEL Rahall for continuing U.S. Congressional support for the Lebanese security forces. Repeatedly warning of Iranian influence in Lebanon, Hariri stressed the need for more sophisticated U.S. military assistance. Hizballah was the victor at Doha, he said, and although he was looking ahead to the 2009 parliamentary elections, the March 14 majority would be unable to tip the balance of power away from Hizballah without more U.S. help. Hariri gave no indications as to his thinking on whether to become the next prime minister, but Arab leaders attending the parliamentary session later reportedly conveyed their preference for current PM Fouad Siniora to stay on. Saad met with Iranian FM Mottaki the following day, May 26. End summary.

¶2. (C) CODEL Rahall, accompanied by Charge Sison, DCM, and Pol/Econ Chief, met with majority leader Saad Hariri at his headquarters in Qoreitem on May 25 just hours before the swearing in of Lebanese President Michel Sleiman. Hariri aides Ghattas Khoury and Nader Hariri and others also attended. The CODEL consisted of three members of Congress of Lebanese descent: Nick Rahall (D-WV), Darrell Issa (R-CA) and Ray Lahood (D-IL), as well as Charlie Melancon (D-LA), John Linder (R-GA) and Jack Kingston (R-GA).

¶3. (C) Rahall began by recounting the meetings the CODEL had just had with PM Fouad Siniora and president-elect Michel Sleiman. He conveyed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's greetings to Hariri, and noted that Maronite Patriarch Boutros Sfeir had had a good lunch with President Bush. Rahall commented that there had been no victors and no losers in Doha, and that it was time for Lebanon to turn a new page.

¶4. (C) Hariri thanked the CODEL for its presence in Lebanon, adding that the U.S. Congress had consistently stood by the March 14 majority, which appreciated all of its support. Lebanon had experienced three years of agony and assassinations, including March 14 parliamentarians. Hizballah's recent takeover of downtown Beirut was in reality an "invasion of the Iranian Revolution Guard," he said. This is the most dangerous show of Iranian power to date; they are

telling us they can control the country if they want, he warned. The "Gaza" model we feared in Lebanon has happened, he stated grimly.

EYES ON 2009

¶5. (C) Doha may have been a truce between the opposing parties, Hariri continued, but it was only round one. The main battle was the 2009 parliamentary elections. He expressed confidence that if the majority worked hard, it would win the elections. However, he feared that if the opposition sensed a March 14 victory, it would again take to the streets, as evidenced by the opposition's continuing intimidation through burning cars and other actions. (Note: We also have heard numerous stories of Hizballah using torture while interrogating Lebanese citizens. End note.)

MORE U.S. MILITARY ASSISTANCE
NEEDED TO COUNTER HIZBALLAH

¶6. (C) On U.S. military assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and Internal Security Forces (ISF), Hariri noted that the wide discrepancy between the "Vietnam-era" equipment of the LAF and Hizballah's more modern weapons empowered Hizballah. We need more helicopters, tanks, and ammunition, he stressed several times. Unfortunately, the U.S. always has a question mark as to whether its assistance will fall into the wrong hands, he noted. But the LAF has demonstrated repeatedly, even during the civil war, that this will not

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happen. "What the army has, the army has," he said.

¶7. (C) Hariri said he sensed no sense of urgency on the part of the U.S. to provide the necessary military assistance. He advocated a Marshall Plan for the army, he said, to tip the balance of power in March 14's favor. We get statements of support from the U.S., he said, but not the small things that matter so much more. We need Cobra attack helicopters, he repeated, and "a little bit sophisticated tanks" and uparmored vehicles to create a mobile army and provide necessary deterrence. Ten Cobras would not be a threat to Israel, he added.

¶8. (C) If we had had Cobras at Nahr al-Barid, we would not have had 175 LAF casualties -- the equivalent in proportional terms of two to three thousand U.S. soldiers, Hariri said. We are not asking for ballistic missiles, but to go to peace we have to prepare for war. The LAF and ISF are not prepared, he complained. Under the Syrians the ISF had 9,000 members; today it had 25,000, but not enough cars, forcing them to use their personal vehicles or even bicycles to pursue criminals.

¶9. (C) We do not want to fight with Hizballah, he assured the delegation; a civil war would destroy the country. But we need to give more teeth to the armed forces. Iran has a very strong hold in Lebanon; it showed it is ready to use force to counter decisions it does not like. If Hizballah wins the 2009 elections, he warned, this will be the U.S.' problem.

¶10. (C) The Charge noted that the USG was already providing a \$300 million-plus package in military equipment and training to the LAF and \$60 million police training program for the ISF. U/S Defense for Policy Eric Edelman would be returning to Lebanon on May 31 to discuss bilateral defense issues. Rahall added that Chairman of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee John Murtha was willing to help, and that he himself had discussed the matter with Lebanese Charge d'Affaires to Washington Ambassador Antoine Chedid.

¶11. (C) Hariri noted that the U.S. Department of Defense had everything Lebanon needed, it was just a matter of getting approval. Iran has given much more than \$300 million, he

said; it has provided more in the last two years "than anyone has dreamt." Make no mistake, he said, Iran has taken Lebanon hostage.

¶12. (C) Issa stressed the need to ensure that the new LAF Commander would be a strong leader willing to protect the institutions of the state. We also need continuity in the prime ministership, he added. He acknowledged Hariri's comment that there was now a "cold war" between Iran and freedom, and that he would use that to sell USG assistance to Lebanon to Congress. But Hariri needed to help him by providing the right tools in terms of strong Lebanese leadership. Lahoud later reinforced this point, saying Lebanon was on the cusp of a whole new day, but had been without real leadership since the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri. Hariri agreed with Lahoud that President Bush should invite President Sleiman to Washington soon.

¶13. (C) Hariri responded that there had been a golden opportunity after the LAF's victory at Nahr al-Barid to solidify the army. However, because U.S. military assistance was not accelerated, Lebanon was now in a more difficult position than it had been a year ago. Hariri also stressed the need for accelerated Paris III assistance.

¶14. (C) Rahall, noting that he had recently met with a delegation of independent Lebanese Shia visiting Washington, asked whether Hariri was reaching out to these groups, who also were being intimidated by Hizballah. Hariri responded, "definitely," adding, however, that they also need to take some risks. Furthermore, it was not only Shia who were being intimidated by Hizballah; the Sunnis also were targets, he stressed, noting Osama bin Laden's frequent references to Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah. The Druze and Christians are also targets, he added. The Iranians have a long-term strategy in Lebanon, and currently are digesting their political gains. The Charge cited the recent ousting of the Shia Mufti of Tyre Ali al-Amine and vandalism at the home of

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Lebanese judge Ralph Riachy as other examples of intimidation.

¶15. (C) It was not true that there were no winners at Doha, Hariri continued. Hizballah was the victor. March 14 compromised to put things back in order, but it was uncertain how long this would last. We have to be ready, he said. Hizballah realized it had made a mistake and "broken a major wall" by using weapons against Lebanese, especially Sunnis, and provoking Sunni/Shia tensions. He dismissed Rahall's assertion that Hizballah would be ostracized if it attempted to take over Lebanon, explaining that Hizballah did not care. This is just one of the many cards in their hands in their battle against Israel, he said.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Hariri gave no indication during the meeting whether he had made up his mind to take on the prime ministership. In a subsequent conversation at Beirut International Airport with the Charge, however, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan (AbZ) said he had told Hariri the Arabs' preference was for Siniora to stay on. (We hear the Saudis told Siniora the same.) He reportedly told Hariri that Siniora should do the heavy lifting in terms of pushing through Paris III reforms and making other difficult choices. AbZ said he had spoken frequently with Saad over the past few months and had even sensed two-three months ago he had been on the brink of leaving March 14. AbZ also reported that the moderate Arab states were preparing a \$1 billion assistance package for the LAF and ISF. AbZ also said current LAF G-2 (military intelligence) Director Georges Khoury should not be the next Commander-in-Chief.

¶17. (C) Berri advisor Ali Hamdan called Pol/Econ Chief late in the evening the same day to report that he was hearing

Siniora would become prime minister. March 14 MP Mohammad Hajjar also told us his personal preference was Siniora. However, the following day, May 26, Rafik Hariri's sister, Bahia, predicted Saad would take the job.

¶18. (U) Saad Hariri met with Iranian FM Mottaki on May 27 at this residence in Qoreitem (Mottaki also met earlier in the day with President Sleiman and PM Siniora). After the meeting, Saad said to the media that the meeting "focused on relations between the two countries." He also said, "There was an abnormal situation in the absence of a President of the Republic, but we are very optimistic after the election actually took place."

¶19. (U) CODEL Rahall departed Beirut before this message was sent.

SISON